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Voluntourism

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Voluntourism

Abstract

"The *missio dei* is God's work in the world. Missions, both long- and short-term, must always exist in submission to God's work."

Posting about increasing impact in mission work from *In All Things* - an online hub committed to the claim that the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ has implications for the entire world.

<http://inallthings.org/voluntourism/>

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Comments

In All Things is a publication of the [Andreas Center for Reformed Scholarship and Service](#) at Dordt College.

Voluntourism

 [all in allthings.org/voluntourism/](http://allthings.org/voluntourism/)

Aaron Baart

Missional tourism. Voluntourism. These terms have been popularized over the past few years as a (well-deserved) critique began to form around the 2 billion dollar industry that is short-term missions. Books like *When Helping Hurts* and *Toxic Charity* began to help us reflect more clearly on the ways that short-term missions, in many instances, aren't even neutral in their impact on the places and peoples visited; rather, they can actually be detrimental. These arguments focus on several key areas. Here's a list of the ones that I see as the most potentially damaging:

1. Lack of long-term impact. In many cases, short-term mission projects help to create a culture of dependence and perpetuate a cycle of aid rather than development. Money and quick visits are thrown at systemic problems, leaving the missional tourist believing they made an impact as they watched a house being roofed or the digging of a well. All the while, the development of knowledge, skill-acquisition, and overall ownership of the project isn't actually shared. In fact, the message shared was: "We came here to do what you couldn't do for yourself."

2. Reinforcement of Western arrogance. When missional efforts resemble a form of neo-colonialism, information and resources get disseminated from the West to the rest. This is a dangerous message for both the missionary and the indigenous group visited because it negates the validity of God's presence and work in the people and places being visited. It further serves to re-enforce arrogant stereotypes of Western superiority. In the end, the very idea of going somewhere to *serve* in missions actually sends the exact opposite message: a neocolonial system of financial and theological superiority becomes the real message.

3. The poor stewarding of 2 billion. For anyone who has spent any amount of time in the developing world, one can see very quickly ways that the 2 billion dollars spent on short-term missions could have been invested in more thoughtful ways that could have produced much bigger results. (Think of the parable of the talents in terms of billions!)

Now, hearing all that, you might be assuming that the rest of this post would continue the case against short-term missions. However, I'm not ready to throw the baby out with the bathwater just yet. I should also tell you that in my job and in my spare time, I help create, implement, and lead short-term mission experiences. I oversee the international missions program at the college I work at, and I chair a church-planting and community development ministry that works in Liberia, West Africa. In fact, over the past eighteen months, I have helped coordinate and lead eighteen different short-term missional experiences for over 140 different people.

Well, if it sounds like I'm starting to talk out of both sides of my mouth, let me clarify...

Once reframed, I believe that short-term missional opportunities can provide fantastic, positive impact for all parties involved. But in order to get there, here's some governing principles I would suggest for anyone entertaining the idea of a mission or service trip:

1. Humility. Christ-like humility is always interested in the other before ourselves. Before going anywhere, our hearts, minds, and hands need to adopt postures of genuine service. Practically speaking, this means allowing the people we are going to visit to decide our schedule and our goals for the trip. I'll never forget the first mission trip I ever took when they got to decide everything we did, ate, and saw. It was very un-American and "unproductive." But it was awesome, way better than anything I'd ever experienced on my own terms.

2. Long-term impact. Be picky about the mission organization or NGO you seek to partner with. Is their presence in the country creating long-term economic growth? Do they employ indigenous people almost exclusively, especially in leadership roles? Is your trip contributing to a long-term goal that you and they are excited about?

3. Reciprocity. You aren't going anywhere to "bring Jesus" to anyone. He's already there. He's already at work. It's his world, and these are his people. Genuine community is always reciprocal because it opens us up to the other. Jesus' ministry was incarnational, becoming like the people he came to serve, and ours should be, too. In other words, the goal isn't to accomplish a pre-determined agenda or to-do list; it is to be changed by the people we are serving and being served by.

4. The Work. Never go on a trip that involves doing anything people can do for themselves. Put yourself in someone else's shoes. Imagine a visitor, speaking a different language, coming into your community and maybe even your home and then doing a menial job that you could easily do yourself. Weird, isn't it? Actually, it's insulting.

5. Transformation. A short-term mission trip should always be seeking the goal of long-term transformation. Moreover, that transformation is more about *you* than it is about *them*. I would hope that every short-term missions traveler is asking themselves how they are going to take this short-term opportunity to create lifelong change. Practically speaking, when I hear a traveler come back and make a promise to themselves that they are never going to see their own wealth the same or that they are totally revamping the way they budget or they are going to radically change their consumer habits... now we are getting closer to the kingdom of God, because the cost of this trip has now become an investment in the new creation they are becoming in Christ. And the \$2,000 that the trip cost just got invested in life transformation.

The *missio dei* is God's work in the world. Missions, both long- and short-term, must always exist in submission to God's work. So, the next time you or I contemplate a mission trip overseas, hopefully we really are thinking about our neighbor and what it means to bless them, just as much as we are about ourselves.